

# Dramatism, Popularize, and the new directions in the arena of performative rhetoric

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## Abstract

While Burkean applications of dramatism to the world of dramatic theatre are easily seen, this collaborative study attempts to utilize Burkean identification as a method of character analysis in musical theatre production. Since musical theatre, as a popular art form, crosses many disciplinary boundaries, it is often difficult to demonstrate its scholarly purposes. The authors demonstrate that an analysis of Burkean motives can be more successful in musical production than current interpretive applications through its mystification of popular forms, its ability to promote identification, and its ability to offer Burke studies new directions in the arena of performative rhetoric.

As part of musical theatre production at a regional, liberal arts university, the scholarly attention to interpretation is a necessary facet of each student's learning experience. To demonstrate how even the production of a popular musical demands scholarly attention, directors have often resorted to focusing on literary interpretation or even archival research methodologies in this educational environment. To this end, it is important to maintain a transparent connection to literary theory, and specifically its manifestations in musical theatre characterization and production. As musical theatre bridges both the interpretive focus of theatre and the contextual focus of musicology, disciplinary boundaries are often violated and simultaneously observed. Therefore, while there is broad latitude in how characters and their dialog can be interpreted from the theatrical world, there are fewer interpretive options for the musical interpreter. This dilemma is precisely why a developed theory of musical theatre interpretation and production is significant, especially within the context of a liberal arts education.

In the development of musical interpretation in academic environments, there are three major textbooks which model interpretive strategies for musical theatre: *The Third Line* by Daniel Helfgot, *Acting for Singers* by David Ostwald, and *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course*, edited by Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera. While all three offer comprehensive acting for singing techniques, none of them allow for how those techniques influence each other, requiring actors in musical theatre to utilize only one perspective. This study demonstrates the significance of being able to understand how interpretations actually influence each other and how Kenneth Burke's dramatistic ratios, "how the what influences the what" is a much more successful hermeneutic practice in musical theatre interpretation due to its contextual focus, and that contextual focus is also a characteristic of musical disciplinarity.

Daniel Helfgot's *The Third Line* (1993) was the first and is the oldest systematic approach to interpretation in music theatre production. In *The Third Line*, Helfgot comes at acting for singing specifically for the operatic performer. The "park and bark" stigma associated with opera is a thing of the past, as contemporary opera must contend with the vivacity of music theater style acting, and opera singers are now more beautiful and spontaneous than ever on the stage. This is reinforced through several of Helfgot's chapters, such as "The Opera Performer as Actor," "Movement and Expression," and "Auditioning, Competitions and Recitals." The "third line" specifically refers to Helfgot's three-pronged structure of "Focus, Attitude, and Gesture." *The Third Line* is the singer's interpretation of the other two lines – the music and the text. *The Third Line* encompasses the music analysis, the textual analysis, the dramatic intent, and the expressive interpretation of the music.

David Oswalt's *Acting for Singers* (2005) improved on Helfgot by highlighting competencies such as using improvisation, improving concentration, analyzing dramatic structure, fashioning objectives and super-objectives, subtext, and rehearsing and auditioning. Its focus is both opera and music theatre, using examples from *Carmen* as well as *West Side Story*. Oswalt incorporates theme statements for the entire production, involving everyone from the Director to the Actor in a fascinating study of motivated character development.

The newest addition to musical theatre interpretation and production is *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course* (2008). The emphasis on musical analysis in this text is important for the music theatre actor, in contrast with the operatic performer who usually needs more analytical

acting support. Therefore, the chapters include topics such as foundational acting techniques, musical analysis, elements of storytelling, character analysis, the journey of the song, intensifiers, stylistic elements, as well as auditioning and rehearsal process techniques.

### **Musical Theatre Interpretation and *Little Women, The Musical***

When it came time to produce a musical theatre show in a liberal arts educational setting, the director began with these three interpretative textbooks in mind. Since students in this regional, liberal arts voice program had not previously been required to analyze their characters much in the past, the choice of interpretive approach would be significant. Would students be open to such character work? The director's own favorite directors by far have been those that have encouraged her own delving into her character and then forcing that research to reveal itself in rehearsal. Characters whose objectives were handed to her by a director have been forgotten, shallow characters. So of the three textbooks available, *Acting for Singers* by David Otswalt was chosen to achieve the kind of character development the director wanted, enabling the actors' own interpretations, actions, and directions.

The musical that was chosen for production was Jason Howland's 2005 *Little Women: The Musical*. As a Broadway musical, it ran for five months before touring nationally for over a year, and it featured musical theatre megastars Maureen McGovern as "Marmie," and Sutton Foster as Jo March. Because the story of Little Women is so well-known, the director did not want the students copying what they had seen in the movies, specifically the most recent adaptation by Gillian Armstrong, the one with which they were all most familiar. Since *Little Women: The Musical* is based on the Louisa May Alcott novel, the character analysis work would also have the added dimension of literary analysis. As the director and actors read through the script day for the first several days, super objectives were the first tool each actor utilized in developing their character. Helfgot writes, "If you have already developed your superobjective, you can fashion your objectives by asking yourself, 'How does my character pursue his superobjective in this scene?' You will find the concept of strategic means to be a good clarifying device. Invoke it by saying to yourself 'I,...am working toward... by means of.... Fashion your answer depending on what you feel the music, text, and the stage directions suggest" (112). In rehearsal, as the director had them journal about the super objective of their own life that helped them apply this concept to their Little Women character, the students' super objectives began to come together: "I (character's name) and

working toward (fill in the blank)." Some examples of some of the students' superobjectives were the following:

- I, Professor Bhaer, am working toward starting my life over again in America.

- I, Jo, am working toward using my writing to provide for my family.

- I, Meg, am working toward finding an eligible young man.

- I, Beth, am working toward making every day beautiful.

- I, Marmee, am working towards raising my daughters to find their place in the world.

- I, Aunt March, am working toward preserving the March family name.

- I, Mr. Laurence, am working toward putting up with my neighbors.

The super objectives of the other characters all helped to give them an overarching motivation for the entire show. But this was only the beginning since breaking down each scene only continued to enhance the largesse of the super objective, making this a very important first step. The super objective for Aunt March really helped the actor give life to her number, "Could You," in which she attempts to whip Jo into shape by manipulating her to change, telling her she might take her to Europe: "I believe you could captivate the world...If you could change there is so much you could achieve...someone full of dreams like you...gracious living will make you sublime." This number was a highlight from the show, and this super objective gave Aunt March in her limited stage time, a strong motivation for her entire character every time she was on stage.

In a move similar to Kenneth Burke's dramatistic ratios, Oswalt connects the purpose of an act with the means by which the act is accomplished. In Oswalt's grammar, these means are called "beats." Oswalt writes the following:

A character will try anything that is consistent with her moral code and personality to get what she wants. If her objective in a particular scene is 'I want to keep my beloved from leaving,' she might begin with flattery. If that doesn't work, she might try reasoning, cajoling, threatening, seducing, bribing, or even blackmail. We call these various strategies acting beats. Acting beats are mini-objectives that clarify the relationship of your character's individual thoughts and actions to her objectives. (120)

Discovering the "acting beats" for the ball at the Moffats was essential, since in the musical these scenes combine several balls and outings from the novel and the film adaptations into one. Because many dynamics are altered within this one section of Act I in the musical version, the scene

objective/beat work on the getting ready for, attending, and recovering from the ball at the Moffats would make this scene pivotal for motivating the rest of the production. In the following charts, the director has provided examples of how utilizing Oswalts's objectives and beats lead the actors into an understanding of their motivations.

### Scene 3: Getting Ready for the Ball

Characters	Objective: I am working toward	Beat(s): by means of
Marmee	Making sure her girls get every chance available to them	Getting Meg to her first ball.
Beth	Living through my sisters	Helping Meg get ready
Jo	Becoming a lady like AM says I have to	Going to this ball with Meg.
Meg	Finding an eligible young man	Attending the Moffat's ball.
Amy	Equality with my sisters	Getting ready for the ball, too.
Delighted	The girls helping Meg feel comfortable	Appealing to Meg's vanity and romantic tendencies
OVERALL	This scene works towards dividing the sisters and their places in life	By placing Jo and Meg outside their normal environment and leaving Beth and Amy at home.

As can be seen from these charts, Oswalt's discussion of "beats" is extremely similar to Burke's concept of dramatistic "agency." Oswalt writes, "You can fashion your acting beats, whether for operas, musicals, songs, art songs, or lieder, most effectively by once again using the device of means. Say to yourself "I want to carry out my objective by means of..." Or you can ask, "What do I do in this scene to achieve my objective?" (120). While

getting student actors to understand what they do in a scene to achieve their character's objective is important, what is missing from Oswalt's description is to what extent the act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose are acting on each other simultaneously, and this is the understanding that Burkean dramatism enables actors to accomplish, the ability to identify the degree of influence. In other words, while the pentads help us understand "how the what influences the what," utilizing the pentads in musical theatre productions helps us understand "to what degree the what influences the what," and this seems the most important result of this application for Burke studies at large.

Many adoptions of the pentad focus on the pentad's use for juridical rhetoric, or an examination of past "acts," whether it be Ronald Reagan's invasion of Grenada (Birdsell, 1990) Plato's rhetoric (Abrams, 1981), or even corporate picnics (Walker and Monin, 2001). Utilizing pentads for musical performance fundamentally changes the usefulness of Burke's thought from past events, to their adaptation for deliberative, or future events, i.e., an upcoming musical performance. Utilizing the pentad allowed actors to immediately see the degree of effect of their changing interpretations in real time. This ability to see the immediate variation of those changing interpretations is a potential new direction for Burke studies, and opens Burke scholarship from examinations of past acts, to a new methodologies for studying rhetoric as future performatives.

### **Dramatism and *Little Women: The Musical***

The first goal in utilizing dramatism in the production process of *Little Women: The Musical* was to achieve a greater depth of character analysis than found in Oswalt's "beats" method. To achieve this goal, a brief introduction to Kenneth Burke's dramatism was given by a Burke historian. In his workshop he presented students with the following:

In *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), literary theorist Kenneth Burke outlined his conception of what he would call "dramatism": a method that readers can use to identify the rhetorical nature of any text, opening it to multiple perspectives.

ACT: what was done?

SCENE: When and where was the act performed?

AGENT: Who did it?

AGENCY: How and with what was the act performed?

PURPOSE: What motivated the act?

After readers answer these statements based on their interpretations, the next question focuses on the influence one may have on another. "How does the \_\_\_\_\_ influence the \_\_\_\_\_?"

The director, therefore, took the worksheet above and had the students examine the "purpose-agency ratio" to determine what influence they had on each other, whether or not the purpose determined the agency, and vice versa. In the cases above, the students could see that Amy's burning of Jo's story was one of the most significant purpose-agency ratios of that entire sequence of the show, and therefore the staging of that scene would get more attention than other purpose-agency influences. The most significant implication from using Oswalt's "beats" before engaging in a discussion of the Burkean pentads was to see how limiting Oswalt's "beats" actually was on dramatic interpretation. Since Oswalt's beats were only one out of a possible twenty ratios that could be utilized, students immediately began pentading other scenes in which they were singing. For example, Jo is proposed to twice in the musical, once by Laurie and once by Professor Bhaer. Burke's dramatistic ratios immensely helped the actor who played Jo in finding her motivation for rejecting one and accepting another. By only using Oswalt's "beats," Laurie's antics take center stage in his being refused, but through pentading Professor Bhaer's proposal, a new reason for Laurie's rejection emerged:

Act—Bhaer proposes

Agent—mentor to Jo, represents "the Other," represents "not-Concord"

Scene—outside the March house

Agency—through her published book

Purpose—to tell her he's missed her and loves her

In this pentad, it is Bhaer as "the Other," the fact that he is "not-Concord" that the actor who played Jo identified as having the most effect on Bhaer's acceptance, and therefore since Laurie is the next door neighbor, the one who most specifically represents Concord, the actor who played Jo was able to exploit this tension between the two men.

### **Directorial Intent, Actors, and Identification**

The second purpose for utilizing Burkean pentads was to help shape the director's own interpretive focus. Since the director did not want to dictate the staging, the pentads help students identify with the directorial interpretations as they creatively participate in the creation of the meaning of the performance. As part of the preparation for the production, the director

conducted archival research in the Louisa May Alcott papers in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. What surprised her was that there was no evidence in the Alcott letters that would indicate that Louisa and "Beth" were very close in real life. There were no letters in Louisa's collection from "Beth," but many letters between "Beth" and "Marmee." The director began to wonder whether Louisa's portrayal of Jo in the novel is what she merely wished her relationship had been with her sister "Beth" in real life. In the novel they are very close, thus every adaptation of the novel portrays them as very close. Based on her reading of the Louisa May Alcott letters, then, the director tried to capture a bit more of this dynamic in the scene "Some Things are Meant to Be." This scene is normally staged with Jo's overwhelming sadness of Beth's impending death. Based on a new possible interpretation from the Alcott letters, the director wanted to stage Jo not as a grieving sister, but in denial over what is happening, so much so that she cannot even give Beth her full attention in this scene. By staging Jo as calloused to her sister's illness, though, the director could encourage the audience to identify with her need to change, to collectively hope this is not the Jo we are left with at the end of the story. When Jo does realize that her home is truly important, her recent denial then becomes an even more significant motivation for her writing and submitting her great novel in the first place.

In order for this alternate interpretation to not be merely handed down to the actors to obey, utilizing the pentads allowed the actors to come to these conclusions on their own, as they creatively participated in arriving at similar interpretations. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), Kenneth Burke writes, "Longinus refers to that kind of persuasion wherein the audience feels as though it were not merely receiving, but were itself creatively participating in the poet's or speaker's assertion. Could we not say that, in such cases, the audience is exalted by the assertion because it has the feel of collaborating in the assertion?" (57-58). To demonstrate to the actors that they, too, might have alternative motivations than merely what is written in the novel, the actor playing Jo and the actor portraying Beth wrote their own pentads:

While they did not necessarily arrive at the same conclusion, the fact that they could arrive at similar conclusions allowed them to understand the staging and see how many other interpretations were possible, i.e., "if not this one, then why not that one?" The pentads also balanced this artistic freedom with the need to stay as close to audience expectations as possible as a feature of the musical theatre genre. Dennis Brissett writes,

"Dramatism gives one no criteria for such smug demarcations of one's own virtues and the vices of all others. We are not talking about some simplistic notion of demystification as an unmasking, a revelation of the truth; rather we are offering dramatism as a technique of analysis of human interaction and also as a method for assessing social theories of human conduct" (336). The students could see that while there was no one single correct interpretation, there were limitations on how interpretive we could be. While the pentads helped create those interpretations, they simultaneously allowed the students to examine them. Bissett writes, "The demystification of action that can be achieved by reclaiming neglected petadic elements has its counterpart in the critique of theories of action that similarly neglect elements of the pentad. And here, unlike other theories of action, dramatism provides the method of demystifying and criticizing itself. It is possible, therefore, to produce a dramatistic account of some situation, and, without shifting one's ground, equally possible to analyze that account" (Brissett 336). This analyzing of student interpretations is not allowed by Oswalt's "beats" method. The students only supplied what they thought were the agencies by means of which for their purposes, but they never considered why they believed that until they utilized Burke's dramatistic ratios. This is why filling out the charts for Oswalt's acting beats seemed like homework to many of the students, but creatively participating in persuading the audience that Jo March needed to change did not seem like homework at all.

### **Dramatism, Musical Theatre, and Popular Art**

These interpretative choices that involve the audience in the creative participation of Jo March's transformation, their identification, has an even greater implication for the genre of musical theatre at large. Because musical theatre forms are much more closely tied to popular culture than "straight" theatre, musicals generally do not challenge audiences or create their own drama. Kimberling writes on dramatism's ability to challenge the inherent limitations in popular art's predictable forms:

The Burkean model provides a tentative answer to the frequently posed question as to whether popular art reflects or engenders social values and mores. Dramatism would suggest that it does both. Popular art reflects social values because it presents universal patterns of experience, patterns that the audience must recognize if it is to understand the work. It engenders values by presenting dramatic scenarios placing ordinary values in conflict situations, situations demanding that some hierarchy of values be established, and by stimulating audience identification with the processes of value formation (Kimberling 84).

Again, the ball scene is an example of how dramatism can be used not only to reflect social values, but to engender values by demanding that the audience establish a hierarchy of those values. By utilizing Oswalt's "beats" in the previous charts, one can see how students supplied fairly formulaic means to their purposes, i.e., Meg wanting to make a good impression on the Moffatt's by making sure Jo behaves herself. However, since pentads allow students to both simultaneously produce and analyze their dramatistic accounts, the ball scene can be used to not only reflect social values, but to also engender conflicting values. To engender these conflicting values, however, some additional work is required by the actors than merely identifying the acting "beats." In other words, the actors must "earn their increment" through developing new pathways for conflicting values to operate. One of these pathways is the subject of Burke's Language as Symbolic Action:

There is a further step in our outward direction: and it is the one we most need for our present inquiry. Insofar as a poem is properly formed, suppose you were to ask yourself what subtitle might properly be given to each stanza. Or suppose you were to break up each chapter of a novel into a succession of steps or stages, giving titles to such parts of a chapter, then to chapters, then to groups of chapters, and so finally to the whole work. Your entitlings would not necessarily agree with any that the author himself may have given, since titles are often assigned for fortuitous reasons. And of course other readers might not agree with your proposed entitlings. But the point is this: Insofar as the work is properly formed, and insofar as your titles are accurate, they mark off a succession of essences (369-370).

What Burke identifies as "subtitles," acting preparation generally calls "subtext." While "subtext" is a pretty common way for actors to find meaning in the script, it becomes even more significant the more the director wants the audience to establish hierarchies of values. For musical theatre productions, with their inertia already tilted towards merely reinforcing cultural norms and values, subtext is essential in producing dramatistic pathways for audiences to consider these competing values. This is how the concept of subtext was introduced to the actors for *Little Women, The Musical*:

Subtext now becomes useful specifically for the songs you sing. Subtext is the main source of your internal dialogue, the chatter of your inner voice expressing how you feel about what is happening. When you fashion subtext for each phrase of your text and complete it with internal thoughts for all the places where you don't sing, you make your character into a mul-

ti-level communicator like a real person, and you take a giant step toward being believable on stage.

The focus on creating "internal dialogue" to form a "multi-level" communicator has its roots not only in the "unending conversations" taking place, but also in the creation of multiple pathways of action. Will the characters act in predictable ways that reinforce social norms, or will characters surprise audience members by their resistance to formulaic behaviors? Using the example of the student analysis of the ball scene again, the creation of subtext created some surprising opportunities for presenting audiences with conflicting values to examine. Using Oswalt's acting "beats," the actor playing Meg indicated that her purpose was to make a good impression on the Moffatt's by making sure Jo did not embarrass them. However, through subtext of the same scene, other values are revealed. As Meg is approached by Mr. Brooke at the ball, she pulls Jo away from the dancing to calm her down, dropping her own dance card in the process. Mr. Brooke has come to get Laurie to take him home. They are center stage and Jo and Laurie are listening and observing them intently:

Meg: Sir! You've taken my dance card!  
*I need it but I don't want to have to ask.*

Brooke: Your dance card? – Oh! Is this yours? Sorry. So – you're Margaret March? What? I'm an idiot. Who is this? She's pretty!

Meg: Yes, I am.  
*He's handsome!*

Brooke: It's – a splendid party, isn't it? –  
*I am wowed by you!*

Meg: Yes, it is. Quite - "lovely." So you're from Boston?  
*I don't know what to say...*

Brooke: Actually Maine.  
*I can't stop staring at you!*

Meg: I've never been to Maine.  
*Why did I just say that?*

Brooke: You should go. It's beautiful country. Very primitive –  
*You should come with me!*

Meg: I like primitive.

*Why did I say THAT?*

Brooke: Really?  
*Does she like me?*

Laurie: Mr. Brooke is a romantic.  
*Ooooo (sarcastic)*

Meg: Is that true?  
*He has something I like.*

Brooke: Well, no, no. I read Sheats and Kelley. I mean Keats and Shelley. –  
*Shut up, Laurie, and let me talk!*

Meg: So do I.  
*I understand you.*  
Brooke: You read Keats and Shelley?  
*This girl is way too cool for me.*  
Meg: All the time.  
*I actually know those guys.*

In the ball scene, Meg's subtext reveals other purposes than just not embarrassing herself in front of the Moffatt's, which reinforces the social norms. When Meg responds to Mr. Brooke saying, "I like primitive," and her subtext for that line was "Why did I just say THAT?" she is both "producing a dramatistic account of some situation, and, without shifting one's ground, making it equally possible to analyze that account." Meg is reinforcing social norms, i.e., getting married to the handsome male lead character of a musical theatre production, and simultaneously engendering social values, i.e., the legitimization of a distinctively different culture than that of the extravagant ballroom in which the attractive male lead character of a musical theatre production and the attractive female lead character of a musical theatre production will fall in love.

### **Motion, Action, and Staging**

To "block" the production, the director wanted the actors to know why they were moving when they were, and to initiate their own movement rather than just being told to move when the director wanted. After all, the actors have done the character work for they more precisely than even the director, so their suggestions are often quite inspired. The addition of Burkean dramatism in the subtext process suggests blocking options to the actors that they can feel on their own, complicating how the audience believes the characters should be behave in response to social norms. Again, this complication is anachronistic for the musical theatre genre, but dramatism opens musical theatre up to such possibilities, while itself staying true to form. Kimberling writes, "Burke would view [Kaplan's aesthetic theory] as dehumanizing. The reaction mode of Kaplan would find its place, in Burkean terms in the world of motion, not action. The world of human thought and language, however, necessarily implies action, since it is a dialectical process of giving wings to motive, transcending the linear stimulus response realm of mere motion" (Kimberling 70). Insomuch as subtext is an interior dialogue, it participates in the dialectical process of "giving wings to motive," making staging much more meaningful than merely identifying "acting beats" only. In the ballroom scene, therefore, when Mr. Brooke says that Maine is "very primitive," he has many choices. He can reinforce social norms by delivering the line with disdain in comparison to the extravagant

ballroom of the Moffatt's, or he could engender social values by deliver the line with pride, as an almost aside away from the other characters in the ballroom scene. When Meg replies, "I like primitive," she can reflect social norms by being embarrassed about valuing the primitive, or she can engender social values by shouting that out for all in the ballroom to hear.

The staging process, therefore, is based upon a deep understanding of the characters and their motivations for relating to other characters and their scenes independent of the individual objectives for each scene, the overall objective that the audience understands from each scene, and how a group of scenes relates to the entire act. Since no one character could both reflect and engender social norms at the same time, the director utilized a system of scene "leaders" and "followers" for each scene. While each scene demands its own leader, it is the balance of leaders to followers that both simultaneously reflects and engenders social values. The leader in a scene would be center stage more often than not; a follower in a scene would be more upstage rather than downstage. The leader could reflect a social norm, and the audience could witness that effect on the follower, or the leader could engender a new social value, and the audience could witness that effect on the follower. In this way, motion becomes action, since the movement is motivated by "human thought and language."

In a society where television productions such as *Glee* or *Smash* portray musical theatre production as frivolous pursuits of vanity devoid of scholarly attention, the significance of Burkean dramatism is vital to a reinvigoration of this popular art form. Brissett writes, "It is only in the social scientific use of dramatism—seeing to give due weight to all elements of the pentad in the explanation of human conduct—that we can find an implicit commitment to the demystification of any single-minded explanatory scenario"(336). Dramatism reconnects musical theatre to the contextualized field of musicology, while simultaneously distancing itself from pure aesthetic value conflict. The pentadic ratios, therefore, simultaneously provide the substance of interpretive material for musical theatre production in the characterization, blocking, and staging phases of production, and the means by which to examine characterization, blocking, and staging without "shifting one's ground," creating exciting opportunities for the scholarly attention to this popular art form.

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